



From Africa to Reggae: The Anansi Connection

Ron Cherry

Spiders have been the focus of folklore, legends, and myths around the world. Spiders have been blamed for misfortunes ranging from food and water poisoning to plagues. Spiders have been seen as forecasters of weather (“If you step on a spider, you’ll bring rain”) and omens of good luck (“Spider in the corner, money in the chest”). Many cultures have told stories of spiders providing inspiration for perseverance. Best known among these stories is that of Scotland’s Robert the Bruce, who was motivated to rally his men and defeat the English after he watched a spider constructing a web across the entrance of a cave where he was hiding (Mason 1999).

Spiders frequently occur in mythology in roles ranging from trivial to most important. Examples of spiders in major roles in mythology from different areas of the world are shown in Table 1. There are two main reasons for the widespread occurrence of spiders in mythology. First is the patient persistence of spiders at achieving tasks

such as waiting motionless for prey or completing and rebuilding webs. Hence, many cultures tell stories of spiders that provide inspiration for continued perseverance at a task. Second, and more important, is the ability of spiders to produce silk and webs. For example, many Native American stories tell of spiders spinning webs that connect the earth to the sky, providing souls with a silken ladder to the spirit world above (Mason 1999).

There is a wealth of literature on insects and spiders in mythology. The book *Insect Mythology* by Kritsky and Cherry (2000) is a recent and comprehensive review of this subject. However, the important spider figure, Anansi, is almost non-existent in entomological literature. Other than a brief mention by Cherry (2003) and Bouquiaux (2003), there is no other mention of Anansi in entomological literature. In contrast, Anansi is commonly found and discussed in anthropological and mythological books such as Wilkinson (1998), Grimal (1965),

Parrinder (1967), Leach (1984), and Ions (1999), to name a few.

So who is this elusive spider who has escaped the attention of entomologists? Anansi is the hero and trickster of an enormous body of West African folktales. Africans had a deep appreciation of mental keenness, as well as sympathy and admiration for those who used their wits to extract themselves from difficult situations. Those who outwitted opponents were respected more than those who outfought them. Cleverness was a trait much revered in African folktales (Ollivier 1994). Hence, Anansi was popular as a small but clever trickster who often outwitted larger opponents.

Anansi was originally a creator of the world in Gold Coast mythology, and still plays the role of culture hero in such tales as those in which he steals the sun. However, Anansi’s dominant role throughout mythology of African origin is that of a cunning and crafty trickster who prospers by his wits. He dupes other animals, including man, to

Table 1. Examples of spiders in major roles in mythology.

Role	Location	Culture	Reference
Anansi is a spider god and cunning trickster	Africa and Caribbean	West African	Parrinder 1967
Ancient spider creates heaven and earth	Micronesia	Gilbert Islands	Poignant 1967
Arachne changed to spider by goddess Minerva	Greece	Greek	Hamilton 1942
Djieien is a vast and hideous spider monster	United States	Seneca	Matthews and Matthews 2005
First shaman changes into a spider and attacks God	Siberia	Buryat	Eliade 1992
Inktomi is trickster Spider Man associated with eroticism	United States	Sioux	Leeming and Leeming 1995
Marawa is the Spider-God who tricked man out of his immortality	Melanesia	Banks Islands	Knappert 1995
Spider woman helps mankind escape flood	United States	Hopi	Cavendish 1993
Tsuchi-Gomo is a giant malignant spider that hunted humans for sport	Japan	Old Japan	Matthews and Matthews 2005
Water spider obtains fire for mankind	United States	Cherokee	Willis 1998

his own profit, and in modern versions this sometimes includes missionaries. He is also a magician who appears sometimes as a man and sometimes as a spider. There are a number of stories in which Anansi turns into a spider at the moment of greatest danger, thus saving himself (Leach 1984).

Although an important figure in African mythology, Anansi became especially important as a trickster figure to blacks in the New World due in large part to slavery. In the African-American world, populated by blacks and yet commonly under the political and economic control of whites, the usefulness of learning wariness and counteractive devices of wit was obvious (Abrahams 1985). Stories of the small but quick-witted Anansi outsmarting larger adversaries had much symbolic appeal to early slaves and, after the end of formal slavery, to blacks still living in poverty.

Anansi stories are known throughout the West Indies, especially in Jamaica, where Anansi has been called Jamaica's national folk hero (Jekyll 1966). The Anansi stories were introduced to Jamaica in the 1600s by the Akan people of the Gold Coast, who were brought to the New World as slaves. The stories were told and retold in the three Twi dialects—Ashanti, Fanti, and Akwapim—which were by far the most important African sources of Jamaican patois. Mulvaney (1990) notes that Anansi is a

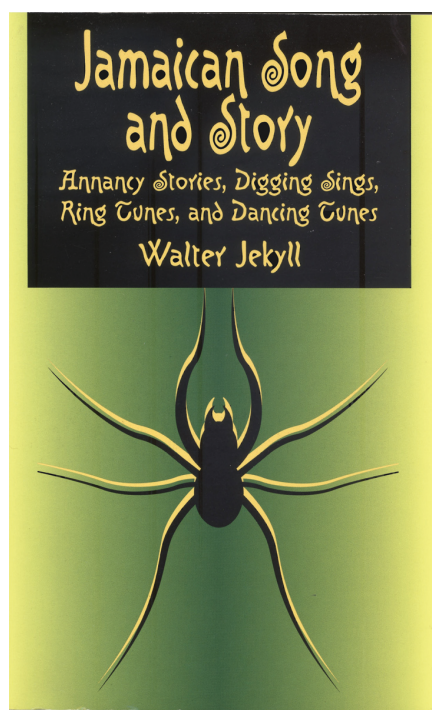


Fig. 1. The book *Jamaican Song and Story* (Jekyll, 2005) contains numerous Anansi stories and features Anansi on its cover.



Fig. 2. Miss Lou refers to the author, Louise Bennett, who was a cultural icon of Jamaica. She was a poet and media star who championed folk customs in books such as *Anancy and Miss Lou* (Bennett 1979).

dominant figure in Jamaican folk stories, and the crafty Anansi has traditionally played a role in the psyche of African Jamaicans. For example, the tradition of oral folklore is preserved in children's storybooks. Children's folklore and literature contains numerous Anansi stories and many Jamaicans tell bedtime Anansi stories to their children. Anansi is generally a figure of admiration whose cunning and scheming nature reflects qualities necessary to survive in an oppressive society. Do the children perceive the sociological implications of Anansi stories? It has been suggested that Anansi stories provide drama, excitement, and humor, but like most animal stories, they are not really about animals, but about human beings, and we recognize ourselves in the antics of the creatures (Davidson 2003). Most Anansi stories include songs that have been the true lullabies to Jamaican children for generations (Bennett 1979).

Anansi's influence also extends beyond children's books, even providing lessons for "street smarts" needed on the mean streets of urban Jamaica. For example, Anansi takes many shapes: at times he seems to be a man, and at other times, he is a spider, running along his web and taking refuge in the ceiling (Davidson 2003). As White (1998) notes, in Jamaica, "If there was one thing that Anancy had been trying to teach the sufferah since slavery days it was never to establish a posi-

tion that can be clearly identified, never to assume one form to the exclusion of others. In the ghetto people who became too visible, too easily categorized, are good for only one strikin' thing – target practice."

As a last note, music, especially reggae, has been one of Jamaica's greatest exports to a worldwide market. Here, also, the devious Anansi has managed to infiltrate. For example, the Maroons in Jamaica were an early pre-reggae source of authentic African music. These songs featured part singing, antiphonal call-response chanting, and the repetition of single, short musical phrases—all of which are characteristic of reggae. The venerable African hero, Anansi the spider, is found in several of these songs (Chang and Chen 1998).

In contrast, during the mid-1900s, the Rastafarian movement was most influential in the development of socially conscious "roots reggae" in Jamaica. Interestingly, to a Rasta, "bald head" was a derogatory term

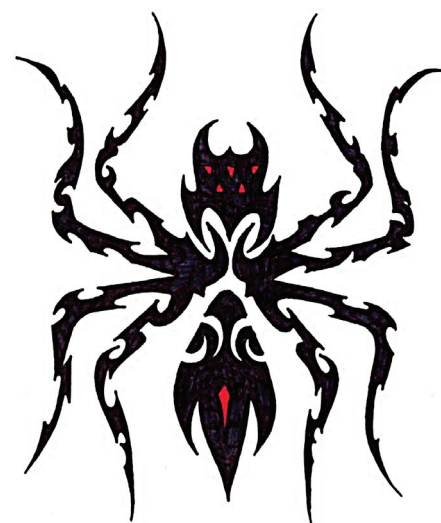


Fig. 3 Contemporary drawing titled "Anansi," by Stefani Coleman. Inspiration for the drawing came from Stefani's mother, who compared the artist to Anansi because she was clever, but deceptive and manipulative.

for those without dreadlocks who cut their hair. It has been suggested that "bald head" is a Rasta repudiation of Anansi, described in stories as a "little bald-headed man" (Mulvaney 1990). If true, it is the exception to the general love of Jamaicans towards Anansi.

More typical is Prahlad (2001), who uses Anansi as a simile in describing the music of the reggae band Itals. He notes, "The music destroyed all notions of beginning, middle, and end, as the rhythm surged and resurged, circular but never quite arriving any place it had been before. Like Anansi, mischievous.

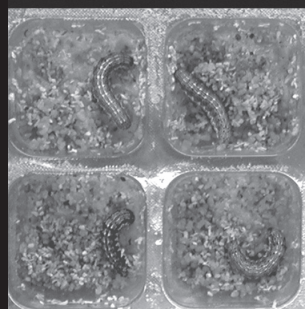
Deceptively complex. An ancient spirit emerging from the earth.”

And, of course, there is Bob Marley, the universal icon of reggae, “one love,” and independence from any form of slavery. Even this reggae superstar has been compared to Anansi by White (1998), who states “There is much about Bob Marley that remains mysterious. He seemed to embody the magical qualities of Anancy, the impish spider of African folklore who has the ability to alter his physical form at will and who is cunning enough to sometimes deceive even the Supreme Being. Marley became a symbolic, larger than life figure for his people in the same ways that Anancy evolved in the slaves’ minds from a character in folklore into a crucial symbol of courage embodying the concept that a supposedly lowly creature can outwit his formidable adversaries.” 

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